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SUBJECT: UNHCR DAMASCUS FEARS FURTHER DEPORTATIONS OF
IRANIAN AHWAZIS

REF: DAM 2391

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) At UNHCR Damascus' request, poloffs met June 5 with UNHCR's senior protection officer Dietrun Gunther and protection officer Tania Pesce about the SARG's treatment of Iranian Ahwazi refugee Saeed Saki, who has been accepted for resettlement in Norway. In January, SARG authorities detained Saki, who was scheduled to leave Syria for Norway in early April, Gunther said. The SARG went against its normal practice of releasing detained refugees accepted for resettlement elsewhere and refused to release Saki to UNHCR, apparently deporting Saki to Iran on May 14, Gunther said. UNHCR representatives in Damascus, Geneva and Tehran and Norwegian diplomats have unsuccessfully sought information about Saki's whereabouts, hoping that he will still be permitted to settle in Norway, Gunther said. UNHCR Geneva planned to hold a press conference June 6 to draw attention to the plight of Saki, who is at risk of being sentenced to death for his activities on behalf of Iran's Arab minority, Gunther said.

¶2. (C) Given Syria and Iran's flourishing bilateral relationship, UNHCR officials fear that the SARG may deport more Ahwazi refugees back to Iran, Gunther said. The SARG detained seven Ahwazi refugees in early May, releasing three of them a few weeks later, she said. SARG officials told the three not to undertake any activities or make statements against Syria or countries friendly to it, Gunther said. The SARG has not provided UNHCR any information about the other four refugees who presumably remain in detention (including one a Dutch national), responding to a UNHCR diplomatic note by saying that neither the MFA nor immigration authorities had any information, Gunther said. Separately, in late May, another Ahwazi refugee in Damascus received a call on his mobile phone from a Syrian authority requesting that he go to the Palestinian Branch of Syrian security for questioning, Gunther said. The refugee did not show up for the appointment, instead going into hiding, Gunther said.

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR Damascus has registered about 30 Ahwazi refugees, although five potential new cases arrive each week, Gunther said. Although male Ahwazis most often request refugee status, many times their wives have even stronger cases as a result of brutal torture at the hands of Iranian authorities, Gunther said.

¶4. (SBU) The executive director of the U.S.-based Ahwaz Human Rights Organization, Karim Abdian, met earlier this year with UNHCR officials in Damascus, while here on a private visit, and has been in communication with Gunther

about the plight of the Ahwazis, lobbying for their resettlement in the United States, Gunther said. Holland and Norway have also expressed strong interest in Ahwazi referrals, Gunther said.

15. (SBU) Together with Regional RefCoord Cairo, we have advised UNHCR that the U.S. will consider resettlement for any Ahwazis it can refer to the U.S. Resettlement Program (USRP) in time for the DHS/CIS circuit ride to Damascus scheduled to begin July 16.
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